THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Earn It

October 18, 1998
John M. Buchanan

The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart...in human responsibility. The only backbone to our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my firm, my country, my success – responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged.

Vaclav Havel
Address to the U. S. Congress

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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"For to those who have, more will be given and they will have an abundance."
Matthew 25:29 (NRSV)

Dear God, we come to church sometimes to get away from all the noise and frantic activity of a long work week and a busy weekend. We come, eager for a few moments of quiet in which to hear a still, small voice that often is drowned out by the noises of the life we live. So, speak your word to us now. And, in this moment together, show us what you want us to do—what we need to do to be all that you have made us to be. Startle us with your truth, open us to your love which makes all things, even us, new, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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It is Stewardship Sunday: the day in the year when the Church musters its courage, takes a deep breath, and comes right out and asks for money. Let me thank you for knowing what happens on this day and consenting to be here nevertheless.

The simple truth, however, is that stewardship is about more than money, and that while Fourth Presbyterian Church wants and needs your pledges, God wants a lot more than that. God wants everything. God wants you to manage everything you have and are.

I saw a great stewardship movie this summer. It was not produced by our denominational stewardship resource office, nor by a commercial fund-raising organization. This stewardship film was produced in Hollywood by Steven Spielberg, and its title is *Saving Private Ryan.*

Unlike most of the motion pictures I have seen—unlike any other, in fact—I have been thinking about *Saving Private Ryan* every single day since I saw it. It is a violent movie, but a realistic and honest one. Its themes are powerful and have to do with the very essence of the human spirit. What is the value of a single life? From where do courage and valor come? Why is it that human beings will die for one another? And what is it that we owe one another, our families, the institutions we love, our nation, our church, the human race, our Creator—our God, as the price of our humanity? What is our responsibility at the end of the day for having been given the gift of our own lives?

In the days after the Normandy invasion, June 6, 1944, the War Department discovered that three of the four sons of a single Iowa family has already died. The fourth son, Private Ryan, is somewhere in France. General George Marshall, on hearing about the situation, decides that the fourth son will be located and brought back to the United States, to safety and to his family. What is his life worth? Quite a bit, General Marshall decides: whatever it takes. Private Ryan, meanwhile, is somewhere behind enemy lines, having been dropped in an airborne assault which went badly awry—so no one knows exactly where he is.

What is his life worth? The squad of GIs assigned the task of locating him and bringing him out, led by a captain played by Tom Hanks, struggles with the issue, as does the viewer. The mission is very costly. The GIs don't get it: they demean and insult Ryan before meeting him, "I have a mother, too; so do you," one of them says.
There is not much formal religion in *Saving Private Ryan.* But there is lots of devotion and sacrifice and incredible courage as the squad carries out its assignment. Although they would not call it that, a bond of love emerges among them, about which Jesus once said, "greater love has no one than this—that a person lay down his life for a friend."

And it is about stewardship. At the very end, many of the GIs are dead, Private Ryan will be saved. He comes upon the captain, who in civilian life is a high school English teacher, a father and husband, lying mortally wounded. He says to Private Ryan—the last words of the film—his last words, "Earn this."

"Earn it." You have been given a very precious gift. Your life has been bought at a very dear price. Others have died so that you might live. You have not earned this—yet. But now you can. You can live the rest of your life in a manner that honors the gift and the ones who paid the price. You can value the gift of your life at least as much as they did. Earn it. Basic stewardship, I think . . . the same message Jesus gave his friends just before he died.

It is near the end. The plot to kill him is beginning to unfold. It is time for last words, for summing up. The story he told them is about a man who, as he is about to go away on a journey, summons three servants, gives each money,-a portion of his business to manage. The man with five talents invests and doubles his assets. So does the servant who received two. Both took significant risks, both were aggressive, not cautious. And when the owner of the enterprise returned, both were praised, given even more responsibility, promoted, and invited to enter the joy of the master.

The third man is cautious, prudent—he may be the one you want to elect to your Board of Trustees. He knows that the owner is a tough businessman and will not be pleased if his investment is lost. So, he hides it; digs a hole and buries the money in the ground—which was, in fact, the legal and appropriate thing to do if you do not wish to be liable. So this is not a bad man. Not very imaginative nor creative, but he's solid and conservative. And when the owner returns, he is able, with a certain smug satisfaction, to return exactly what had been entrusted to him. Certainly, he expected to be invited to join his colleagues in entering the joy of the master. But, in a twist that must have stunned his disciples, Jesus said that the prudent man was treated very harshly. His money is taken from him and given to the successful investor, and instead of the joy of the master, he is unceremoniously thrown out into the "darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The story is a challenge to the disciples and the early church about how to live out their faith and trust: not prudently and conservatively, but boldly, aggressively; not hiding and preserving and protecting, but mustering courage to live bravely, taking risks for the sake of love and life; being responsible for the gift of the gospel, the gift of salvation which was being given to them. "Earn this."

It's about responsibility and, ultimately, the abundance of life that is the result of being responsible. That, by the way, is the reward the successful stewards receive: more

responsibility. "You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy . . . ." What they were invited to enter, that is to say, is not easy street, not retirement with a comfortable money stream, not a fat bonus, not even a victory banquet with fine cognac and expensive cigars all around, but more business—more things to be in charge of; more responsibility. That is the abundance Jesus is talking about.

It is an important word, a challenging word in a time when the intellectual and spiritual momentum seems to be moving in the other direction in American culture; away from responsibility for anything other than our own private world.

The Independent Sector, a coalition of more than 800 voluntary organizations, foundations, and corporate giving programs, found that "the average household's donation to charity declined from $978 in 1989 to $880 in 1993 . . . and an equivalent decline in hours of volunteer investment." (James Wall, *Hidden Treasures*, pp. 84-5).

The late Christopher Lasch, whose sharp observations on American culture produced the concept of the "new narcissism," lamented the declining sense of responsibility for our common life. In his last book, he wrote about the "lust for immediate gratification that pervades American society." "There is," he said, "a universal concern for self, with self-fulfillment and more recently with self-esteem: slogans of a society incapable of generating a sense of civil obligation." (*op. cit.*, Wall).

I loved something Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said in a speech at Harvard. Discussing the debate about whether or not we are in anyway responsible for stopping the atrocities in the former Yugoslavia, she told Harvard students, "We will be known as the world-class ditherers who stood by while the seeds of renewed global conflict were sown, or as the generation that took strong measures to forge alliances, deter aggression, and keep the peace. Ultimately, it's a matter of judgment, a question of choices."

Earn this. It is an important word. Somehow, across the centuries, the notion has emerged that being a faithful Christian is a matter of avoiding doing immoral, impure, sinful things. New Testament scholar Edward Schweizer says that this story is, "aimed at those devoted to their own personal security. Jesus is saying that a religion concerned only with not doing anything wrong in order that its practitioner may one day stand vindicated ignores the will of God." (*The Good News According to Matthew*, p. 472.)

There is a fundamental difference between New Testament Christianity and much of what goes under the name of religion. Religious ethics traditionally offers negative rules, prohibitions: don't do this, don't do that. Jesus, on measure, without denigrating the rules which are, everyone knows, necessary for a society to survive, nevertheless emphasizes the active, positive moral implications of love: "Do this—do that—for my sake and in my name.

From the beginning, morality in our Judeo-Christian tradition has had more to do with assuming responsibility for one's own life and the life of the community than avoiding moral ambiguity, moral compromise.

Let me tell you about a man who discovered the redeeming power of taking responsibility.

Philip Hallie was a college professor, philosopher, poet and author, who took on an academic research study of good and evil in the modern world, focusing on the medical experiments carried out by the Nazis on Jewish/Slavic/Gypsy children during the war, one of the most unspeakable illustrations of evil imaginable. As his research and interviews with victims, parents of victims, the doctors, medical staff, and clinical personnel proceeded, he was immersed in the graphic pictures and detailed records that were kept. He found himself becoming more and more depressed, finally almost in utter despair about the human condition. How was this possible? How could human beings do this to other human beings? He became cynical, and his work in moral philosophy turned dark and gloomy.

And then, one sleepless night, he took a book from his shelves that he had not read before. It was a history of the French resistance, and in it he began to read about the tiny village of LeChambon and its Protestant pastor, Andre´ Trocme, and his wife Magda.

Trocme was a Huguenot, a French Protestant and a pacifist. In the 1930s, he organized an International School in Le Chambon, and adult students from all over the world came to study. When France fell to Germany and the Vichy regime collaborated with the Nazi effort to deport, confine and ultimately execute Jews, Andre´ Trocme and Magda, were profoundly disturbed. And when refugees from Central Europe started to show up in the village because of the School, the Trocmes knew what they had to do. Many of the refugees were children of parents who had been deported.

The Trocmes were pacifists, but they were not collaborators. So they turned their school into a refugee center, and somehow managed to engage the entire village of 3,000 people to hide and feed and clothe and ultimately escort to freedom some 5,000 Jews.

In the midst of his dreadful research, Philip Hallie was deeply moved by what he read, so he traveled to the South of France and found Magda Trocme in a Protestant convalescent home. They talked and visited many times before she died. Hallie learned how Andre´ and Magda—Andre´ out of his desire to follow Jesus, to be Christ-like Magda because of her heart, her almost fierce Italian love for life, for children—decided that they could not look away from what was happening. In their weakness they would risk everything, their own lives, and also the lives of everybody in the village.

Jewish refugees, many children, would arrive at night and be assigned to homes where they would be sheltered, bathed, clothed, fed, educated, hidden from the police, organized into teams, and then escorted in small groups through the mountains to Geneva.

His experience with Magda Trocme saved Philip Hallie's life. It was his redemption. He said, "I was seeing spontaneous love that had nothing to do with sheer, brute power. I was seeing a new reality. Here was a place where help came from love, not force." (*Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm*, p. 6).

Later, Hallie, the moral philosopher, reflected that there are two basic ethical positions: a "no" ethic and a "yes" ethic. The "no" ethic requires restraint; it may be lived passively, in silence . . . . "On the other hand, the "yes" demands action. You must be alive if you want to meet the demands . . . sometimes you must even put your life on the line. You must go out of your way, sometimes very far out of your way." (p. 27).

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This is, as you know, Stewardship Sunday. And we are asking all our members and all our friends to accept responsibility for the life and mission and future of this church. It has been given to us as a gift. None of us here today were here to organize it or build it. We have it for a while, placed carefully in our hands, and one day we will hand it to those who come after us. At the moment, however, we are in charge, so we, I hope, everyone will be responsible and generous.

But the issue really is more than money and the challenge is more than fund raising.

I continue to appreciate the truth of something told to me when I was just learning about stewardship and talking about money, by one of our missionaries, whose wife died during a violent riot in Indonesia. He said, "if stewardship is only about money, save your breath and raffle a Pontiac."

I love something John Calvin once said. He lived 400 years before there was such a thing as a stewardship pledge campaign. But, he wrote,

> "Let this, therefore, be our rule for generosity and beneficence: we are the stewards of everything." (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*).

We are stewards of everything. God has put into our hands our lives, our abilities, our potential, our capacity to care, to give, to help, to serve, to love, all of it: and at some point each of us has to decide to be responsible, to be in charge.

Jesus Christ calls us to responsibility. We do not earn his grace, his love. It has been given, as has the responsibility now to rejoice in it, to live our lives fully, passionately, deeply, joyfully.

Accepting and practicing responsibility for our own lives, our professions—our patients, clients, students, customers, our families, our spouses, parents, and children, for our partners and friends and neighbors, and for our community, our city, our nation, and for our church.

Philip Hallie wrote, "One's life is usually about as wide as one's love."

The promise is that when we invest what we have been given, when we put it to work for the sake of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the Kingdom, for the sake of the needy, for the sake of the children, for the sake of the church, for the sake of the gospel, the promise is abundance—not of money, but of life, of love, of purpose, and meaning and happiness and responsibility.

Earn it: the promise is, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy."

Amen.